

## **4 Can the Religious Person Say Anything?: Delineating the Boundaries for Religious Speech in Public Discourse in Kierkegaard and Habermas**

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How is it that one of the most famous Christian thinkers—Soren Kierkegaard—and one of the most famous contemporary secular thinkers—Jurgen Habermas—both seem to agree: the religious has nothing to say in the public realm of social, ethical discourse, since it has no claim there? It is, if it is, a quite unexpected agreement. And if they do agree on this matter, how do they agree? How complete is the agreement, or are there important points of disagreement as well? And what are the implications of this agreement? These are the questions this paper tries to answer.

Due to the time constraints, this paper will first lay out the three problems that define the relationship between the ethical and the religious in Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling, showing how the ethical collides with the religious in the well-known story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, as well as showing how Kierkegaard, for the most part, conforms to Habermas' sense of the ethical. This will entail, of course, contrasting Kierkegaard's respective descriptions of the ethical and religious orientations. This will involve connecting certain points of Kierkegaard with elements of Habermas' position in his discourse ethics and principle of universalization, showing, too, how at points the two thinkers differ on the natures of the ethical and religious. Finally, I will have some concluding remarks to make.

We are all familiar, I think, with the story of Abraham as it is found in Genesis chapter twenty two, as well as how Kierkegaard thematizes the story in his most famous work Fear and Trembling. God wakes Abraham in the middle of the night, commands him to take his son Isaac,

the son he loves (as if Abraham needed reminding), the son given Abraham after years of patient trial, the son of promise, and to travel to Mt Moriah only to draw a knife and sacrifice this son upon an altar. Though God does not have Abraham go through with the sacrifice, nevertheless, Gen. 22 seems to contradict everything that Abraham's life story has been about up to that point. And, of course, the obvious question confronts all of us immediately: how can God, supposedly our omnibenevolent creator, command something that clearly contradicts what we would normally consider to be ethical? How can the All-Good command something so clearly not-Good?

Kierkegaard thematizes this story in a variety of poetic and dialectical ways. In the interests of time, I will look mainly at the dialectical issues. As you know, in the latter half of the work, Kierkegaard asks three questions that materialize from reflection on this story: 1. Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical? 2. Is there an absolute duty to God? 3. Is it ethically defensible for Abraham to conceal his purposes from his wife, son, and surrounding community? These three questions form the heart of the debate concerning the relationship between the ethical and the religious, for Kierkegaard.

As for Habermas, he would respond with a hearty "No" to all three questions, just as Kierkegaard's ethical voice in Fear and Trembling does.

The first question is: is there a teleological suspension of the ethical? This question is posed because Abraham's action actually reveals a complexity to it, **if** it proves not to be a simple, ignorant act of murder. The key has to do with the fact that Abraham appears to love Isaac. If he doesn't, then there is no mystery here—his action is murder. But if he loves Isaac, then we must ask: why does Abraham do this? The answer has to do with the distinction between sacrifice and murder, for they may not be the same thing. In what way, then, is

Abraham not a murderer? The answer that Kierkegaard seems to offer is this: **the ethical must exist if it is to provide (that is, be) a proper sacrifice to, for, the religious.** In other words, if Abraham's action is to constitute sacrifice, and not murder, then Isaac must be the object of his love and care. Abraham must have already in place an ethical relationship with his son. Abraham knows his duty to his son, and he loves this duty, finds joy in fulfilling this duty. Thus, if the religious exists, above and beyond the ethical, it demands that the ethical exists prior to it. The religious demands the ethical as a **presupposition.**

But what is the nature of this presupposed ethical? In response to the question about the teleological suspension of the ethical, Kierkegaard characterizes the ethical in the following manner:

The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which can be put from another point of view by saying that it applies at every moment. It rests immanently in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its telos, but is itself the telos for everything outside, and when that is taken up into it, it has no further to go.(Hannay 83)

Kierkegaard here defines the ethical in three important ways: one, the ethical is the universal, a term which he also defines as that which commands all rational agents and commands them necessarily, **no exceptions.** Two, the ethical exists immanently within, and through, the human. It is not transcendent to the human; it **is** the human, and **defines** the human. This is reinforced by the third point Kierkegaard makes in this passage, that the human *telos* is the ethical; that is, the ethical is **constitutive** of the human, and provides the human its purpose, never being a means for any other ends human beings might craft. Thus, to stray from the ethical is to fail to become human.

So Kierkegaard suggests that Abraham might very well meet the above conditions. Abraham loves Isaac, and wishes to live in the ethical's immanence. But clearly he is not living

out this wish; rather, he **suspends** the ethical, temporarily, all the while he packs for his journey, carries his three day journey out, builds the altar, lights the fire, draws the knife. However, to suspend does not mean to eliminate, or dismiss, or abrogate. It means just what it means—to suspend. In other words, Abraham might very well be adhering to the ethical in one sense, yet not in another. Nevertheless, from the ethical’s perspective, suspension is the same as abrogation, and cannot be permitted. The ethical demands Abraham to dwell in its immanence, and respect its authority. And, as we all know, Habermas makes very similar demands as well. As he recently states in his work, An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age, “religious persons must accept the authority of natural, secular reason in the guise of the fallible results of the institutionalized sciences and the basic principles of universalistic egalitarian law and morality.” (16)

Most scholars believe that Kierkegaard has Kant in mind with this description of the ethical, particularly the first formulation of the categorical imperative, the formulation that gives the moral law its universalizable **form**. “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” And Habermas of course bases his entire discourse ethics on a reconfiguration of Kant’s first formulation. What is of interest in our context, however, is this: “Kant’s first formulation of the categorical imperative is supposed to capture the widespread intuition that one ought not to make an exception of oneself.” (Finlayson 83) This, of course, is what Abraham does, or **perhaps** we should say, what God does to Abraham. From the perspective of the ethical, Abraham strays, makes an exception of himself, and therefore fails to realize his human, that is ethical, telos. Thus, Abraham seems to be one of those typical religious types who claim the rules don’t apply to them. He seems to be a typical sectarian, which is Habermas’ problem with religion.

Now, Habermas claims to be replacing Kant's principle of universalizability with his own version of the principle, what he calls "a procedure of moral argumentation," or his **discourse ethics**. That principle states: "Only those norms may claim to be valid that could meet with the consent of all affected in their role as participants in a practical discourse." (MCCA 197)

Habermas does not so much see moral law as a form to measure individual human action by, but as a **process** or **procedure** carried through in discussion and dialogue by all relevant rational agents. As he says elsewhere:

...discourse ethics rejects the *monological approach* of Kant, who assumed that the individual tests his maxims of action *foro interno*, or, as Husserl put it, in the loneliness of his soul. The singularity of Kant's transcendental consciousness simply takes for granted a prior understanding among a plurality of empirical egos; their harmony is pre-established. In discourse ethics, it is not. Discourse ethics prefers to view shared understanding about the generalizability of interests as the *result* of an intersubjectively mounted *public discourse*. There are no shared structures preceding the individual except the universals of language use. (MCCA 203)

At the heart of the ethical, its telos, its substance, its life, is communicative action and discourse. Ethical life is not carried out within the depths of individual consciousness, but publicly through a shared dialogue. Therefore, instead of justification of the formulations of the moral law themselves, to prove their a priori character, or some such, Habermas offers a **self-justifying process** that "proves" itself by producing actual consensus, or, temporarily failing that, a reasonable means that gives one hope for a consensus. Thus, what I think is really happening in Habermas' reconfiguration of Kant is a switch in emphasis within the very formulations of the categorical imperative themselves. Instead of focusing on Kant's first two formulations—the universalizability principle or the treating of all rational agents as ends in themselves—the form and matter of the moral law as Kant sees them—Habermas actually elaborates on the third formulation, what Kant calls the **totality** of the moral law, the one that states that we ought

always to act in such a way that we see ourselves as legislating moral law for others, just as if we belonged to some kind of legislating body, in this case, a **universal** legislating body, the kingdom of ends. Not that the other two formulations aren't involved in discourse ethics—clearly they are—but what else could it mean to create the kingdom of ends but to consistently engage in parliamentary discussion in order to pass proper legislation? Habermas reinterprets Kant to mean that the heart of the ethical is found in its communicability and discursive possibilities. And Kierkegaard agrees. This is what the third problem in Fear and Trembling tackles.

The third problem asks the question: is it ethically right for Abraham not to talk about what he plans to do, with someone at least, especially with his wife and son, who are most material to the situation, and even with the community at large, since it affects them too. Shouldn't Abraham tell somebody what he plans to do? To ask them: what do you think? Should I do it? That Abraham doesn't at all, that he doesn't even seem to consider it, is deeply troubling. Given the seriousness of the situation, it would seem wise for Abraham to talk to someone, to get an outside perspective, to get the kinds of different points of view one would normally get in an open, discursive community.

Yet, what **can** Abraham say here? How would he go about fishing for advice about **this**? What could he possibly say? For the moment Abraham speaks, he expresses ethical doubts about the command given to him; therefore he does not suspend the ethical, nor is he squarely facing the new duty (or should we say "task" here?) God is imposing on him. Actually, to speak at all in this situation is to express the ethical. It would be, in some sense, to do what Habermas claims is the essence of the ethical—to ask questions, communicate interests, make claims,

provide arguments and reasons for one's claims, and to listen to others do the same. It would be to commit to a dialogue.

Abraham does not commit to a dialogue of any kind, but remains concealed. Kierkegaard asserts at the beginning of this third problem: "The ethical is as such the universal; as the universal it is in turn the disclosed." (109) Though Kierkegaard here speaks in terms of disclosure, and Habermas in terms of communicative action, dialogue, and discourse, I think Kierkegaard means something similar to Habermas, for clearly the reason why Abraham's concealment is a problem for the ethical is the fact that Abraham denies a voice to those who have a real stake in the matter. To disclose is to naturally invite dialogue and discourse—in this case, to invite imminent, sharp disagreement. As a result of his silence, Abraham does not allow Sarah, Isaac, or anyone else, to weigh in on the matter. He violates their autonomy. He treats the situation as if it were meant **for him alone**. Again, he seems to play the part of the recalcitrant sectarian.

But, the moment Abraham speaks, he translates...he translates the religious into the ethical thereby relinquishing any hold the religious might have on him, something liberal political theory enjoins him to do. This is exactly Habermas' task (and others like him, for example Rawls)—to show religion, and other sectarian groups, how to translate their interests and claims into universalistic philosophical language so that they too can join the global conversation.

Now, let's go back to the second problem in Fear and Trembling, the one that asks: do human beings have an absolute duty to God? This second problem is actually the most direct and readily apprehended one in Kierkegaard's work; the first and third are somewhat technical in nature. But it makes sense to discuss the teleological suspension of the ethical first, since the

question about whether one has an absolute duty to God is the one most easily misunderstood. I know plenty of people who would answer yes to this question, until you press them a bit. The world, it would seem, is not short on Euthyphros.

What Kierkegaard has to say on this second question is perhaps the most telling. His description of the conflict between the ethical and the religious, as well as what it means for the religious to suspend the ethical's authority, actually finds its clearest expression here in the discussion on what it means to have an absolute duty to God. I feel I need to quote Kierkegaard at length here:

The ethical is the universal and as such, in turn, the divine. It is therefore correct to say that all duty is ultimately duty to God; but if one cannot say more one says in effect that really I have no duty to God. The duty becomes duty to God by being referred to God, but I do not enter into relation with God in the duty itself. Thus it is a duty to love one's neighbor; it is a duty in so far as it is referred to God; yet it is not God that I come in relation to in the duty but the neighbor I love. If, in this connection, I then say that it is my duty to love God, I in fact only utter a tautology, in so far as 'God' is understood in an altogether abstract sense as the divine: i.e. the universal, i.e. duty. The whole of human existence is in that case entirely self-enclosed, as a sphere, and the ethical is at once the limit and completion. God becomes an invisible, vanishing point, an impotent thought, and his power is to be found only in the ethical, which fills all existence. (96)

There is much to comment on here. If the ethical is the binding reality for all human beings, is in fact the absolute, then it is in effect a reality that in no way brings human beings into **contact** with the divine. At best, one relates to the divine only by indirect reference to the divine, either practically while one performs the ethical, or theoretically as part of one's ethical system. But Kierkegaard makes it very clear—my duty is to my fellow human beings, not to God, if the ethical is the absolute. I may refer to God, either practically or theoretically, from time to time, but I am not to try to come into relation with God Himself. My I-Thou relationship exists only with other human beings (something Levinas would agree with, for example); it does not and cannot exist with God. Thus, God is pushed to the margins, becomes a theoretical limit of sorts,



“an invisible, vanishing point, an impotent thought.” The ethical, it would seem, as Kierkegaard thematizes it here, results in a kind of atheism, or, at best, a kind of limbo. There is plenty of dialogue and discourse in **this** world defined by the ethical, but none of it is about, in relation to, or oriented towards, God. On that, the ethical actually prefers, requires, silence. So there is Abraham’s silence, then there is this silence here.

Well, given Habermas’ primary thrust regarding the religious, and its contribution to ethical discourse, Kierkegaard and Habermas seem to be in agreement on the nature of the ethical and its relation to God and the religious. God, and the religious, play no necessary role in the conception of the ethical. The ethical is conceived as human-to-human relations. That’s it, at least primarily. If God has any role to play, it is as a concept translated in such a way as to further the dialogical relationships human beings are to have with each other.

One thing that needs to be said, at this point, about Abraham’s relationship to the ethical is that, regardless of how one construes the ethical, Abraham fails. Kierkegaard is quite clear about this. Look at it this way: no **utilitarian** good comes from his action; **deontologically**, Abraham clearly uses Isaac as a means for his own religious development and violates the second formulation of the moral law, as well as the other formulations; nor does Abraham’s action produce any **communal** good, exemplify any **virtue** (if ever an action were extreme, this is it!) or pursue anything that can be construed as part of the good life; finally, it also does not even fulfill the requirements of divine command theory, for if we say it does, then we have the uncomfortable position of saying God directly contradicts himself. We should add, in passing, that it is all too common for interpreters of Fear and Trembling to think that what it really advocates is a divine command theory, especially because of the second problem. But that cannot be maintained, since divine command theory is after all a theory of **ethics**, and

Kierkegaard makes it clear that Abraham acts in opposition to the ethical, either because he is a murderer, or because he is higher than the ethical. The religious and the ethical are not the same. If Abraham's drawing of the knife can legitimately be construed as a sacrifice, then he is still performing an action that is other than the ethical, even for divine command theory.

And yet, recall: for the religious to obtain, Abraham must express the ethical.

There is another issue here as well. Some people are puzzled, even offended, by Kierkegaard's choice of examples of the ethical in Fear and Trembling. Obviously, he chooses such examples because he is looking for comparisons with Abraham's story and sacrifice. Abraham's trial, after all, has every appearance of a tragedy, at least on the surface. Of course, it is not, and, as you may know, Kierkegaard spends a great deal of time discussing the tragic as a special expression of the ethical, where the sacrificer's action is validated because it is seen as something necessary to do, and necessary **as** a higher expression of the ethical, usually because it produces or affirms some good that is higher than the individual good—the state, the community, etc. Still, in spite of their tragic nature, the three stories Kierkegaard uses as comparisons to Abraham reveal sacrifices that are intelligible, explicable, fathomable. They may still offend us, but not in the same way that Abraham's action offends us. Thus, Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter for the well-being of his people, Jephthah must sacrifice his daughter for similar reasons, and Brutus must tragically put to death his sons, affirming the laws of his land by not exempting his sons from them, however tempting that might be to do as a father. Ethically, all three sacrifices can be justified, *in some sense*. We may find such actions distasteful, according to our modern liberal sympathies, but even we must admit the possibility that actions of this kind are required, from time to time. Consider what this country was prepared to do on 9/11 with Flight 93, if it were necessary. Or consider Churchill's decision at a crucial moment during

World War II to allow Coventry, England to be destroyed, without warning, so as not to alert the Germans that the British had cracked their code. There is even an interesting scenario in the recent remaking of the Battlestar Galactica saga, where, in order to save the human race, a number of human beings are left behind because their spaceships simply aren't fast enough, presumably leading to their destruction.

With all of these situations, some notion of the common good is seen as overriding the private good. How Habermas' theory confronts such situations is not entirely clear to me. Habermas strikes me as not able to deal well with tragedy, or as he might say, strategic actions of a tragic nature. To sacrifice another is not to consult that other; one denies their autonomy and chooses for them. One can include them in the discourse, in these cases, only by imagining what they might say if they could speak. Yet it seems possible to **imagine** a community discoursing over such difficult choices and coming to a consensus concerning them. This is not possible, however, with Abraham's situation.

Thus, to summarize: Kierkegaard thinks that if the religious exists, it teleologically suspends the ethical while not abrogating it, all in the endeavor to fulfill its absolute duty to God, seeing that, in fulfilling that absolute duty, it is required to remain silent, or, perhaps more accurately, the religious naturally **engenders** silence. From the religious perspective, Kierkegaard seems to agree with Habermas' ethical perspective. The authentically religious has nothing universalistic about it. **And** they both seem to agree that the ethical naturally tends towards a needlessness of God.

We must notice something crucial here however, as we move into the final phase of the paper: Abraham's action cannot be described as religiously **sectarian**. Habermas normally construes the religious as sectarian, as the most typical example of groups with interests that are

not universalizable, but have only sharply particularized interests. This is Habermas' primary criticism of religious positions—they are ideological in nature, rather than communicatively and discursively rational.

Thus, Habermas thinks the religious should not speak because they do not employ the right **sort** of language. Their language is loaded with particular values and claims. They cannot engage in rational discourse at a properly abstract level. Nor does religion recognize the human as its proper authority. It takes a particular Scripture or Revelation as its proper authority.

However, Kierkegaard thinks the religious cannot speak, not because it is too sectarian, but because it is too **solitary**. Habermas thinks the religious fails to meet the requirements of discourse ethics—it speaks, but in a self-interested, particularized, sectarian manner.

Kierkegaard sees the religious as **unable** to speak, because what it has to say it cannot say except within the silences of the absolute. Maybe it can speak in the form of prayer, but not in the form of human-to-human dialogue. It is caught in the grip of an I-Thou relation with God, not with other human beings. It is always solitary, a task designated for the singular individual, in “absolute isolation.” (106) The religious never forms **groups**; it can't, **constitutionally**.

Kierkegaard does raise the issue of sectarianism in Fear and Trembling. In Problem II, he mentions those who, in their paltry attempts to acquire the knighthood of faith, join ranks, thinking that such joining together will facilitate acquisition of faith. He describes them as “cheaters,” who “deafen each other with their clang and clatter.” (107) They are false representatives of the religious, and more akin to the aesthetic than to the religious, not to be taken seriously. But it is interesting that both Kierkegaard and Habermas see the religiously sectarian as invalid, Kierkegaard because the sectarian does not see the **religious** correctly; Habermas because the religious sees itself as a universal that it cannot be, that is, it fails to

understand the nature of the **ethical**. (In a certain sense, this is obviously true for Kierkegaard too.) These two vantages on the sectarian strike me as saying the same thing, but from two different angles.

There are a couple of related, and quite interesting, stand alone questions that we cannot explore here, but let's just ask them anyway, for the sake of reflection. Given what we have argued thus far about the religious and its non-universalistic nature, how ought we to see **liturgy**? How ought we to see **Scripture**? Both are public forms of religious communication. Yet both also appear to aim at the individual. Perhaps what we see with each of them is the proper **synthesis** of the individual and the social, where individuals, in solitude, confront the absolute...**together**?

Well, back to our topic at hand. So neither Kierkegaard nor Habermas thinks the religious is authentically expressed in the form of a partisan group. Yet, that is exactly how the religious is typically expressed, as we all know. In fact, religion today is more fragmented and fractured than ever before, divided into sects and denominations of all kinds. As a result, as Habermas and other liberal theorists argue, religion nearly always has a fragmenting and fracturing effect on public discourse. These religious sects believe that they too have a legitimate voice in public discourse, a voice that deserves to be heard, a vote that should be counted in the democratic polling of things. And many want more than that, believing that their position is the true universal, striving oftentimes quite desperately to impose it on others, something that both Habermas and Kierkegaard argue against in their respective positions.

What I am leading up to is this: the pragmatic spheres of ethics and politics are all about making **claims**, claims that one tries to exercise and justify in public, to get others to come to one's side, to get others to agree with one's own position. We think this way because, as

Habermas argues, it is built into the very structures and pragmatic dynamics of language use. In other words, public discourse is **inherently normative**. This involves the assertion of rights—claims of justice that we want others to recognize—and it seems to be human nature oftentimes to assert rights without seeing the complementary responsibilities that go along with those rights. But it is important to see how fundamental claim-making is, not only in our culture, but many other cultures, perhaps even in all cultures. And this claim making is an odd mix of private, partisan, and universal sensibilities—i.e., I deserve x because x is mine, or because I am a member of y group, or because I am a human being. The lattermost of course is the universal at work in us. And for Habermas, to be normatively involved in ethical discourse, to assert and argue for claims of our own, entails too that we listen to the claims of others. For we might be wrong in our claims. But that is precisely what it means to discourse and dialogue. This is what it means to be ethical, in Habermas' sense.

Abraham has a claim. His claim is—Isaac is my son. I am Isaac's father. **I am a father** and I deserve to have a son, this son, my son of promise. One can easily imagine the host of arguments Abraham could bring to bear against anyone who might suggest that he sacrifice this beloved, yet much deserved, son of his. Including a God. Arguments from a personal perspective, from a father's perspective, from a human perspective, from the special perspective of one who has formed a unique social contract with his God. And likely there are others. But think of the thick set of claims Abraham can legitimately make against God's command to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham has every right to turn God down. It is his **ethical** right.

Indeed, this is what a tragic or ethical hero would have done. Looking again at the tragically ethical heroes Kierkegaard looks at in Fear and Trembling, a tragic hero is still an ethical person, in Kierkegaard's mind, only because they have resort to a higher expression of

the universal. Sacrifice of the kind Kierkegaard examines in Fear and Trembling can only find justification if it has some higher good to achieve. After all, Agamemnon does not turn his god down. His god also demands a sacrifice. But the reason why figures like Agamemnon are not Abrahams is, once again, due to some understandable greater good their sacrifice effects. Nevertheless, the reason why tragic figures, though ethical, are still tragic is that their sacrifice is for the sake of a claim that cancels their own individual claim. But they make up for that sacrifice by gaining a greater good on the other end of things.

As a result, Kierkegaard notices something quite amazing about such tragic, ethical figures—they become **resigned** figures as well. They cease to **care** about, or at least they seem to care **less for**, the person they must sacrifice. It is as if the only way they can go through with the sacrifice is by no longer caring for them, by becoming stoically indifferent to the whole situation. This is how Kierkegaard characterizes all the tragic figures he examines in Fear and Trembling.

This is precisely what one scholar, Edward Mooney, argues. He argues that the primary difference between Abraham, the knight of faith, and a tragic hero, or knight of infinite resignation, is that with the latter “care as well as claim is **renounced**” in the very act of sacrifice, whereas with Abraham “he sees or knows in his bones that renouncing all **claims** on the finite is not renouncing all **care** for it.” (54) In fact, this is what Abraham learns from, and through, his trial. God is teaching him to relinquish all claims—as a father, a human being, a founder of a people, etc—but not by ceasing to care for those things. Actually, his care is to increase. That is what is behind God’s command to sacrifice. Abraham is to relinquish, without resigning.

But oddly enough, what do we see with the ethical? It would seem the ethical is all about making claims, yet, it would also seem that with the ethical, **care wanes with the exercise of claim**. It is what enables Agamemnon, for example, to go through with the sacrifice of Iphigeneia—in order to sacrifice her he must care less for her, distance himself from her. **His care for her is so bound up with his claim on her that once he must relinquish that claim, for the sake of a higher expression of the ethical, he naturally also surrenders some of his care for her**. His love is inextricably tied up with his sense of justice. He loves Iphigeneia precisely because she is **his**. His sense of responsibility is completely bound up with **her**, such that feeling some obligation also makes him feel **entitled** to some sort of claim as well. Thus, if one of the ethical's values is justice, and justice is about boundaries and limits, as Plato informs us, then injustice is a violation of some boundary. It is a violation of a legitimate claim. Only, it would seem now, that learning how to make and exercise and make good on claims does **not** also teach us how to care.

But this is precisely the problem as Habermas sees it, only he couches matters in terms of **justice**, on the one hand, and **solidarity**, on the other. Habermas argues that the two **goals** of moral discourse are justice and solidarity. Habermas says: “The first postulates equal respect and equal rights for the individual, whereas the second postulates empathy and concern for the well-being of one's neighbor.” (MCCA 200) The two are in constant tension. Justice has to do with claims, solidarity with care. And whenever we exercise a claim against someone, it becomes quite difficult to care; or if we exercise a claim in favor of someone, we come to care “too much.” Perhaps this is why tolerance is the great virtue of modern, liberal democracy; and jealousy such a universal human trait.



But now we can perhaps see the connection between Habermas and Kierkegaard. If Mooney is right, and faith is a relation that teaches us how to renounce claim without abandoning care along with it, then we can start to see how the religious ought to express itself in public discourse without speaking.

Kierkegaard's insights into the nature of the religious help us make sense of the relationship between the religious and the ethical, for what he asserts in Fear and Trembling is that what Abraham is sacrificing is not just Isaac, but **his ethical relation with Isaac**. As he says, "the temptation is the ethical itself." (88) Abraham is not just sacrificing Isaac, he is also sacrificing his ethical nature, his ethical relationship with Isaac. From the ethical's perspective, what Abraham is giving up is the very thing that is supposed to save him—his ethical character, his moral substance, his obligatory, loving relationships with other human beings.

Thus, what Kierkegaard means for the reader to think when he talks of Abraham's sacrifice is to bracket [Abraham's ethical relation with Isaac], that is, the reader must **bracket *that*** when he imagines Abraham drawing the knife. By commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son, the son he **loves**, without any evident ethical telos to fulfill, God separates the love Abraham feels for Isaac from the ethical claim he naturally wants to exercise with respect to Isaac. If Abraham were to balk at the command, it is only because his sense of justice has been affronted. That he doesn't, says something else about Abraham.

Thus, there is a huge difference between sectarian religion exercising political claims in public, and the nature of the authentic religious in Kierkegaard, silent when it comes to exercising claims, in fact actually relinquishing those claims without at all giving up on solidarity with the person the ethical claim targets, regardless of the **way** it targets them. What this amounts to is a kind of suffering. Yet, after all, isn't that what the essence of the religious

is—to suffer? And to love? It can make claims, but in silence. And, like Abraham, it can hope eternally to receive those claims back, just as Abraham receives Isaac back, now in complete joy and grace, and not because God, or some other subject, has respected some ethical claim of his. I suppose suffering itself **is** an argument. Silence, in fact, might very well be an argument. Think, for example, of Christ's silence in the midst of the Grand Inquisitor's invective. Why does Dostoevsky have Christ remain so silent? Is it possible that Christ's silence can be construed as an argument? Or, to use another example from the The Brothers Karamazov: the elder monk Zosima tells the story of the mysterious visitor who confesses to him of a murder he committed years earlier. Zosima finally convinces the man to confess publicly, and if you remember, no one believes the man. The community thinks he has gone mad, and it blames Zosima instead for the man's strange behavior in his final days. However, Zosima remains silent, receiving the undeserved blame happily. He has a claim, against the man himself and his community, but he does not exercise it. And he feels joy over this.

Therefore, we can see that Habermas and Kierkegaard agree, in some of their conclusions at least, though they arrive by different routes. Habermas sees religiousness as inherently sectarian, therefore unethical; Kierkegaard sees the religious as inherently solitary, and opposed to the ethical only because the ethical is limited in how well it can get us to care for (or against) that which we exercise some sort of claim. The authentically religious then expresses its solidarity with others, even when, or perhaps especially when, its sense of justice is violated. It sacrifices that sense of justice. And in doing so, it may very well get it back.

A final remark. If there is something to this notion that the religious equals continuing to care, simultaneous to renouncing all claim, then the ramifications for the problem of suffering are profound. Perhaps this insight about the religious relationship between care and claim

provides the best basis for **any** theodicy—to continue to love, even when one has absolutely no good **reason** to. In Leszek Kolakowski’s simply put words: “God owes us nothing.” In other words, no ethical justification of suffering is possible. Kierkegaard, at the end of Either/Or: II, argues for the thesis that “in relation to God we human beings are always in the wrong.” If that is the case, how we exercise claims against one another is thrown into radical doubt. A radical suspension, if you will. And how we suffer, how we care for one another, are one and the same task, or trial.